



Russia wants to be a power to be reckoned with in the Indian Ocean

No public strategy is defined, but a list of Moscow's military and paramilitary activity in the region is revealing.

By Dr Alexey Muraviev

February this year was marked by a heightened Russian naval activity in the Indian Ocean. Russian naval task groups drawn from the Baltic and Black Sea fleets took part in two international naval exercises – one with Iran and another as part of Pakistan-led multilateral exercise [AMAN 21](#). Russia's military presence in the region will soon include a permanent naval replenishment facility as it seeks to promote itself as an alternative source of influence to other global powers, such as the United States and China.

Moscow has not publicly defined an Indian Ocean regional strategy, but an analysis of major doctrinal documents provides some clues about its thinking. Neither Russia's 2013 [Foreign Policy Concept](#) document nor its 2015 [National Security Strategy](#) mention the Indian Ocean as a whole, but instead focus on specific regions in and around the region, such as South Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

Perhaps the best indication of a regional strategy can be found in the 2015 [Maritime Doctrine](#), which identifies the Indian Ocean as one of six regional priority areas in the maritime domain (along with the Atlantic, Arctic, Pacific, Caspian and Antarctic). The document lists the following objectives: Strengthening relations with India; the intensification of Russia's commercial and other maritime activities in the area; and enforcing maritime security through a forward naval presence and good relations with regional states. In this, Russia's growing involvement in the region appears driven by an overall objective of securing a long-term niche presence in a strategically important and lucrative part of the world.

Historically Moscow has pursued a clearly defined strategy in South Asia which has focused on maintaining a privileged strategic partnership with India, close ties with Sri Lanka and, more recently, deepening strategic ties with Pakistan (although this is increasingly a cause of friction with India). Russia's long-term strategic engagement with the Indian Ocean region beyond South Asia now involves three main vectors:

- *Geopolitical*: expanding influence by building partners, engaging through networks with geographic links to the Indian Ocean, and contesting the role of other major players such as the United States and China.
- *Military-strategic*: combating asymmetric security threats including assistance to regional partners in countering organised crime, piracy, regional terrorism and internal militant opposition, strengthening regional defence ties and power projection.
- *Economic*: enhancing economic interests in the Indian Ocean itself and in Africa.

Russia's economic interests in the Indian Ocean range from exploitation of sea-based resources such as fishing to supporting its national resources sector (mining, oil and gas, and nuclear industry). Moscow is keen to secure a niche presence across the region, including comprehensive economic engagement with old Soviet clients (such as India, Ethiopia, Madagascar, Mozambique, Seychelles and Sudan) and new partners (for example, Pakistan, South Africa).

In 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced [plans](#) to double trade with African nations to over US\$40 billion per annum by 2025 as part of broadening Russia's global economic engagement. Moscow is writing off outstanding obligations of the [former recipients](#) of Soviet/post-Soviet aid in exchange for trading concessions, privileged access rights and security concessions.

Moscow's growing economic interests in Africa also enhances its interests in sea lines of communication, including along the east and west coasts of Africa, which are now seen as "[important areas \(zones\)](#)".

A list of Russian military and paramilitary activity in the western Indian Ocean region is revealing. The activity has included:

- Counter-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden/Horn of Africa (since [2009](#))
- Special maritime operations in the Gulf of Aden/Arabian Sea, such as extensive hydrographic survey operations and intelligence gathering

- Naval exercise MOSI with China and South Africa off the Cape of Good Hope ([2019](#))
- Naval exercise Maritime Security Belt in the Gulf of Oman with China and Iran ([2019](#)) and with Iran ([2021](#))
- Regular port calls in countries such as Madagascar, Mozambique, Oman, Seychelles, South Africa, Sudan
- Aerial forward operations (Tu-160 Blackjack bomber task group) in South Africa ([2019](#))

Since 2017, Russia has also entered into bilateral defence or naval agreements with several states in the region, including with Egypt, Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Madagascar, Mozambique and Sudan. Several countries (Madagascar, Mozambique and Sudan) have granted port access rights to the Russian Navy, while other (Egypt, Central African Republic, Madagascar, Mozambique and Sudan) have allowed the Russian Air Force to use their airspace.

According to [one report](#), Russia has sought to establish military bases in Egypt, Central African Republic, Eritrea, Madagascar and Mozambique. Moscow also reached a 25-year deal to build a [new naval replenishment facility](#) in Sudan in November last year.

In building relationships in Africa, Moscow seeks to capitalise on the powerful Soviet heritage, including Soviet support for many Indian Ocean nations in their anti-colonial struggles.

In addition, as part of Moscow's [grey zone or hybrid warfare campaign in Africa](#), Russian [private military contractors](#) have been deployed to several African countries, including Madagascar, Mozambique and Sudan, where activities have included training of local forces, protecting Russian businesses, assisting in Russian defence equipment transfers and participating in combat operations. Some believe that the Russian government [will increase its reliance on contractors](#) as proxies in Africa and elsewhere, if relations with the United States deteriorate further.

Russia has no plans or means to act as a principal strategic counterweight to the United States or China, but rather promotes itself as an alternative centre of influence. As during the Cold War, Russian forward naval presence in the Indian Ocean would aim to track US naval operations in the area. With respect to China, Moscow will softly compete with Beijing, while actively pushing its agenda via the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation formats. Finally, the Indian

Ocean also offers a link to the other area of [growing importance for Moscow](#), the Antarctic.

Although possibly less visible than the United States or China, Russia has returned as a factor in the Indian Ocean's geopolitical and strategic affairs as a power to be reckoned with.

This piece was produced as part of a two-year project being undertaken by the National Security College on the Indian Ocean, with the support of the Department of Defence.



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